UNITED NATIONS

Daily Highlights

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TUESDAY HIGHLIGHTS

* In Presidential statement, Security Council deplores downing of civil aircraft by Cuban air force; asks International Civil Aviation Organization to investigate.

* Cuba tells Council downed planes were in its airspace and pilot ignored warnings; says group behind flights is waging campaign to subvert Cuba's constitutional order.

* United States calls action against aircraft a crime; says there was time for legal action rather than use of air-to-air missiles; Cuba will call for General Assembly session to present its case.

* Security Council suspends sanctions against Bosnian Serbs.

* Secretary-General urges Cameroon and Nigeria to settle dispute over Bakassi Peninsula peacefully; Security Council Members call on parties to observe a cease-fire and withdraw forces.

* Secretary-General begins official visit to Brazil.

* Next round of talks between the United Nations and Iraq on the "food for oil formula" will begin on 11 March.

* Extra polling day scheduled in Sierra Leone to cope with heavy voter turnout in country's legislative and national elections.

* UN sanctions should not be used as primary means to settle disputes between States, China tells Committee on Charter.

* WHO says quick response by Gabon and international medical team contains spread of Ebola virus.

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The Security Council has strongly deplored the shooting down of two civil aircraft by the Cuban air force on 24 February, apparently resulting in the deaths of four people. In a statement read out by its President, Madeleine Albright (United States), early this morning, the Council asked the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) to investigate the entire incident. It called on the United States and Cuban Governments to cooperate with the investigation.

The Council recalled that, according to international law, as reflected in Article 3 bis of the International Convention on Civil Aviation of 7 December 1944 added by the Montreal Protocol of 10 May 1984, States must refrain from the use of weapons against civil aircraft in flight and must not endanger the lives of persons on board and the safety of aircraft. It asked the ICAO to report its findings to the Council as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, according to a United Nations spokesman, the ICAO's governing council would meet in Montreal, Canada, on March 6 to discuss the issue.

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Cuba told the Security Council this morning that the pilot of one of the planes shot down over Cuban airspace had ignored warnings. The Permanent Representative of Cuba, Bruno Rodriguez Parrilla, said his Government had irrefutable proof that two aircraft were in Cuban airspace when they were downed. Earlier in the day, other planes originating from the United States had also violated his country's airspace. The group behind the flights, "Brothers to the Rescue", was engaged in a campaign aimed at subverting Cuba's constitutional order and such organizations acted with impunity under the protection of the United States Government.

Mr. Rodriguez said his country's territorial waters and airspace had been violated many times by organizations based in the United States. Cuba had indicated the dangers of unauthorized flights into its airspace on a number of occasions, however, the United States had failed to prevent the flights. Acting under a civilian cloak, the organizations had undertaken terrorist acts. He reminded the Council that States parties to the Convention on International Civil Aviation, had agreed not to use civil aviation for incompatible purposes and to take appropriate measures to prevent the use of civil aviation in its territory for such purposes.

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Transcripts of conversations between the pilots of Cuban air force MIGs and their ground controller, showed there was plenty of time for legal action against the two civilian Cessna aircraft, according to the Permanent Representative of the United States, Madeleine Albright. Referring to the transcripts supplied by

her Government, Ambassador Albright told correspondents this afternoon that the Cuban pilots could have warned the Cessnas they were in dangerous territory by using voice-to-voice contact, dipping their plane's wings or escorting them out of the area, instead of using air-to-air missiles to "take them out".

Ambassador Albright said Cuban assertions that the two private Cessna aircraft posed a threat to its territory were ridiculous. The MIG pilots knew the planes were small Cessnas, piloted by civilians and were no threat at the time. She described the Security Council statement as strong and said it showed that the international community considered the Cuban action was a crime and that shooting unarmed aircraft out of the skies was an act to be condemned and deplored.

Meanwhile, the Foreign Minister of Cuba, Roberto Robaina, speaking to correspondents after his arrival in New York, said his Government would call for a reconvened session of the General Assembly to explain his country's position. The Security Council had know he was arriving today, yet had not waited before meeting on the issue. Cuba had evidence of how patient its air force pilots had been and how many warnings they had given, he said.

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The Security Council today suspended sanctions against the Bosnian Serbs. Council President Madeleine Albright told correspondents the decision followed confirmation by the Commander of the Implementation Forces (IFOR) Admiral Leighton Smith, that the Bosnian Serbs had complied with the zones of separation agreement as provided for in the Dayton Peace Accord.

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Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali has urged Nigeria and Cameroon to settle their dispute over the Bakassi Peninsula peacefully and in accordance with the United Nations Charter. According to a United Nations spokesman, the Secretary-General met separately yesterday, with the Permanent Representatives of both countries and expressed serious concerns over the deteriorating situation in the Peninsula. He noted that the dispute is currently being considered by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and appealed to the two Governments to abstain from any action which might increase tension between them.

Meanwhile, Council President Madeleine Albright told the press that Council Members had called on Nigeria and Cameroon to observe a cease-fire and withdraw their forces to the positions occupied before the case was brought before the ICJ. They regretted the loss of life and recalled the United Nations Charter prohibition against the use of force. Ambassador Albright said Council Members had taken note of various bilateral and regional efforts to resolve the conflict.

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The Secretary-General was in Brazil today on the first leg of an official trip which will also take him to Mexico. While in Brazil, the Secretary-General will hold meetings with President Fernando Henrique Cardoso and senior Government officials as well as with other dignitaries in Sao Paulo and Brasilia. The Secretary-General will go to the Brazilian Congress to meet with the Presidents of the Senate and the House of Representatives. He will also meet with the President of the Brazilian Supreme Court.

The Secretary-General is expected to attend the signing ceremony for a new project which will help coordinate an ambitious $250 million pilot programme to preserve tropical wilderness areas in Brazil. The $6 million project will receive support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the European Union.

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The next round of talks between the United Nations and Iraq regarding the so-called "oil for food formula" will begin on 11 March, a United Nations spokesman said today. The discussions are on the implementation of Security Council resolution 986 (1995), which permits Iraq to sell a limited amount of oil -- up to $2 billion over six months -- in exchange for badly needed food and medicine.

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An extra day of polling has been scheduled in Sierra Leone today to cope with the very heavy voter turnout in yesterday's Presidential and Legislative elections, according to a United Nations spokesman. A military coup overthrew the Government in January, but the coup's leaders agreed to let the vote go ahead as scheduled.

A United Nations electoral assistance mission was coordinating the work of 70 international observers and will issue a statement on the outcome of the elections, the spokesman said. So far, no major incidents have been reported during voting, she added.

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Control measures in Gabon by the Ministry of Health and an international medical team appear to be containing the spread of the Ebola haemorrhagic fever in the country, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). Some 27 cases of Ebola have been reported in Gabon so far, mainly in a remote area in the north of the country. Additional suspected cases were under surveillance in the same

region. The Ministry of Health moved quickly to isolate actual and suspected Ebola cases and conducted a large-scale public information campaign about the disease, the WHO said.

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United Nations sanctions should not be used as the primary means of settling disputes between States, China told the Special Committee on the Charter of the United Nations and on the Strengthening of the Role of the Organization. Zhang Kening said yesterday that the number of countries adversely affected by the unintended consequences of sanctions imposed under Chapter VII of the Charter had increased greatly. A procedure for consultations between the Council and third States should be set up. Agencies for early warning and dispute settlement would reduce the need to impose sanctions.

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